

# Going Back to Move Forward

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] So, as I said a moment ago, this is Palm Sunday. We have also been in a series in our church focusing on the theme of emotionally healthy spirituality, talking about the fact that when we are called to follow Jesus, Jesus wants every part of us, and asking ourselves what that means when it comes to our emotional maturity.

You can't be spiritually mature if you remain emotionally immature. And so, we're going to continue that series. One of the things that is worth noting is that any time you talk about growth, any time you talk about progress, any time you talk about developing as a human being, I think many of us often have this idea of a kind of line graph going up and to the right.

And we like to imagine that our lives are kind of more or less making steady progress up and to the right. Now, there might be a few setbacks here and there, but generally, we like to imagine ourselves as progressing up and to the right.

And what's interesting is this idea of progress is probably more inspired by corporate America and American culture and values than it is a Christian vision of life and progress.

In Christian tradition, there's a different image that we use to talk about making progress in life and it's the image of the labyrinth. And a labyrinth is not a line graph going up and to the right.

[ 1 : 2 9 ] A line graph, I mean, a labyrinth has a lot of twists. It has a lot of turns. In a labyrinth, you sort of start out on your journey.

But then as you look at the labyrinth, over time, you're going to circle back. And you're going to circle back almost to the beginning of your journey. And then you'll move away from it again. And then you'll circle back almost to the beginning of your journey.

And every time, if you're not prepared for that, I can feel like I'm no longer making progress. I'm moving backwards in my life. But the key point of the labyrinth is actually a very important spiritual principle.

And you see this all around. You even see it kind of hijacked in commercials and things like that. But the point is this. Sometimes we have to go back in order to actually move forward.

Sometimes the only way to make progress in your life is to be willing to go back. And that's what we're going to focus on this morning. We're going to look at Galatians chapter 1, verses 11 to 17. Going back in order to move forward.

[ 2 : 3 0 ] We're going to see this in Paul's life. So first we're going to look at this passage. What does it mean? And then we'll talk most of our time about what it means for us. Let's pray. Lord, we thank You for Your Word.

And we thank You for its inherent objective power. That there is a way that we open Your Word and do our best to interpret it faithfully in accordance with tradition.

And yet we also know it's a living Word. And Your Holy Spirit can use this Word in mighty, powerful ways, independent of anything that we say. And so I pray that that would be what happens right now.

I pray that as we are here, even though we're distracted by our masks and maybe some of us with our kids and some of us with things that we have to do after the service, that, Lord, amid all these distractions, that we would be attuned to the voice and the leading of Your Holy Spirit.

And I pray that that would happen through Your Word, Lord, for our good and for Your glory. In Your Son's name, amen. Amen. So first of all, let's look at this passage. Let me give you a little context so we understand what's going on here.

[ 3 : 3 5 ] Paul had come into Galatia with a very, very, very disturbing message for many people. For some people, it created a lot of hope. For other people, it was very disturbing.

His message was essentially this. Jesus Christ, who suffered and was crucified, died and was buried, has risen from death.

This is what we're going to celebrate in just a week. And he says that because Jesus rose from the grave and because the Holy Spirit has come upon God's people, Jesus is calling into existence a new worldwide family.

He's establishing one great new multi-ethnic, multicultural, worldwide family. So people no longer have to become Jewish in order to know God.

Now knowing God isn't dependent on your ethnicity or your cultural identity. All people who trust in Christ for the forgiveness of sin can become a part of this new family.

[ 4 : 38 ] And so a lot of Jews, a lot of very faithful Jews, were objecting to this. And they were challenging Paul and saying, you're no real apostle. This isn't legitimate.

So in verses 11 and following, Paul describes his encounter with Jesus and how that encounter changed everything about him. And he says, starting in verse 13, For you've heard of my former life in Judaism.

He's talking about his past. How I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people.

And then here's the key phrase. So extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. That's what we want to hone in on. Because Paul says, in my former life, I was completely defined by the traditions of my fathers.

These are traditions that he had been born into. He was born into a way of life. Born into a particular culture. Born into an entire array of assumptions about the world. Then he says in verse 15, But when he who had set me apart before I was born and who called me by his grace was pleased to reveal his son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me.

[ 5 : 56 ] Next thing we want to focus on. But I went away into Arabia. Now I have to confess, I read this passage for years and just skipped right over that part. Okay, Arabia, then Damascus, then on to preach the gospel to the Gentiles.

Okay, great. That's a very important little verse that is very easy to skip over. Because you need to stop reading and you need to ask, what could possibly be in Arabia?

Why did Jesus encounter Paul? Paul recognizes that everything that he was persecuting is actually legitimately of God. Everything has changed. He realizes Jesus is the son of God.

He rose from death. First thing he does is go to Arabia. Arabia. Commentators tell us that Arabia is the place where Mount Sinai is located.

Sinai was the birthplace of Paul's spiritual family that he was born into, the Jewish culture, right?

Mount Sinai is the place where God defined his relationship with his people.

[ 7 : 01 ] He set them free from slavery. He brought them out in the wilderness. He brought them to Sinai. And this is where God defines the terms of their relationship. So this is where God gives them the law, which if you've been in our foundations class, you know the law is all about teaching people how to live as free human beings in the world.

And then he gave them basically their identity. This is who you are. This is who I am in relation to you. And so think about this. The first thing that Paul does after he encounters the risen Jesus is to take a spiritual pilgrimage back to Sinai.

The birthplace of his spiritual family. And the reason is that Paul is coming to terms with the fact that Jesus is building a new spiritual family.

Unlike the Jews, this new family is not defined by their ability to keep God's law. They're defined, as verse 15 says, by grace. So here's what Scott McKnight says in his commentary.

He says, Paul seems to have stayed there in Sinai for three years. And in this period of withdrawal, as he meditated on the Old Testament Scriptures, on the facts of the life and the death of Jesus that he already knew, and on his experience of conversion, the gospel of the grace of God was revealed to him in its fullness.

[ 8 : 18 ] So that's what it says. What does it mean? Well, here's what it means. Paul has to go back before he can go forward in his life of following Jesus.

He meets Jesus. He believes the gospel. But then he has to go back to Sinai. What this means is that Paul realizes that he has to reevaluate all of the ways and traditions of his old spiritual family in light of the gospel.

He has to break away from the traditions of his fathers, to use his phrase. And what we need to understand is we often see this, and we only think in religious terms.

The theology of fulfilling the law versus the theology of grace. And certainly that's at the very center of it. But we don't want to make the mistake of separating the religious from every other aspect of life because Paul wouldn't have made that mistake.

And as you read the New Testament letters, which is essentially the fruit of this pilgrimage, what you see is that Paul is rethinking every aspect of his life. Not just the religious traditions that he was born into, but the social traditions.

[ 9 : 30 ] The emotional traditions. The psychological traditions. The political traditions. The cultural traditions. So Paul, as we see later in this letter, he's rethinking race. He's rethinking ethnicity and ethnic identity.

He's rethinking gender. He's rethinking socioeconomic class and how we think about people of different classes. He's rethinking who can associate with whom.

Who can visit which house. Who can I eat with when I sit down to eat food. What kind of food is it okay to eat. He's rethinking clean versus unclean.

He's rethinking what relationships should look like between husbands and wives, between parents and children, between employers and employees, between subjects and their government leaders, right?

He's rethinking every corner of life in light of the gospel. Only then is Paul able to move forward as part of the new spiritual family of Jesus Christ.

[ 10 : 31 ] He has to break away from the traditions of his fathers in order to move forward into the new traditions of Jesus Christ. That he's received through the gospel. The implications of this are fairly straightforward.

This is something every Christian needs to do. Every Christian. As soon as we begin to come to an understanding of the gospel, whether you became a follower of Jesus as a young child, or you became a follower of Jesus a year ago, as we come to understand the gospel, it is more and more and more important for us to go back and to rethink and to reevaluate the traditions of our mothers and fathers that we have inherited, and to see all of them through the lens of the gospel as we move forward following Christ.

Right? So every Christian, all of you, those of you who are Christians, we all have two families.

There's the family that you were born into, and there's the new family of God that you have been reborn into through faith and your baptism.

That's your birth certificate for God's family. Right? So like Paul, we've all been profoundly shaped by the traditions of our fathers and mothers, our families of origin, and we bring all of that with us into the family of God.

You know, you bring all kinds of assumptions and traditions and ways of thinking into the church family. And to be totally frank, some of those things are compatible with following Jesus, and some of those things that you have brought into the church are incompatible with the gospel.

[ 12 : 11 ] And we need to do the hard work of figuring out what needs to be stripped away, what we need to break away from. So I want to apply this in a couple of ways. Going back and moving forward.

First, let's talk a little bit more about how to go back. How to go back to Sinai, so to speak, in our own lives, the birthplace of the culture that we were born into.

In order to go back, you need to take some time to reflect on your past, your own childhood, your upbringing, your parents, your siblings.

What your childhood home was like. So I want you to think about your childhood home, your childhood environment, your primary caregivers, who was in the home. And I want you to just ask all kinds of questions about your upbringing.

What did you learn about money? What did you learn about money and what money represents? For some people, money represents security. For some people, money represents power.

[ 13 : 14 ] For some people, money represents influence or importance or control. What did money represent? Did your parents even ever talk about it? Did you know how much your parents made?

Were you expected to help pay the bills? How was money treated in your home? How did your family define success? Was it nothing less than an Ivy League education will do?

Right? Some families are okay with C's. Some families see anything less than an A plus as a failure. Was success getting married and having lots of kids and staying within 10 miles of where you were born?

Was success just doing whatever made you happy as long as you're happy? Right? Right? How was success defined? Were people in your childhood home open about their feelings?

Did people express all their feelings, the good, the bad, and the ugly? Or were only certain feelings allowed in your home? If other feelings got expressed, you got in trouble. If you had two parents in your home, two primary caregivers, whose approval did you crave the most?

[ 14 : 28 ] And then, very important, what did you have to do in order to earn it? Was sex a topic for open discussion in your family?

Or was that kind of a taboo topic? Were there other taboo topics that you just don't talk about in our family? How was conflict handled in the house you grew up in?

Did people get angry and yell? Did people throw things? Did people slam doors? Was there abusive behavior, physical, emotional abuse? Or were you expected to keep the peace at all costs?

Nobody ever raised their voice. And if you got mad, you went and you got mad in a room by yourself. Was conflict handled indirectly, passive aggressively? Right? Were there mountains, cauldrons of resentment under the surface that you knew were just simmering away?

How were politics handled in your home? Was politics something that was openly discussed? Did you have to conform to a particular political ideology in order to fit into your family?

[ 15 : 38 ] Are you a black sheep in your family because you've broken away from that now? Was your family super close and enmeshed where everybody was always up in everybody else's business?

Or was your family more disconnected where everybody kind of does their own thing and maybe as adults you're spread all around the world? Right? Were gender roles fixed?

Men do this? Women do this? That's the way it is? Or were they more flexible and interchangeable?

If you grew up in a Christian home, what was the attitude toward the surrounding culture, toward secular music, toward movies, toward books?

Right? Was there any difference or was there a barrier? Were there certain things that you're not allowed to read, watch, or listen to? What attitude did you inherit toward people from other racial backgrounds or other ethnic backgrounds?

What attitudes were held in the home that you picked up on? Right? I know there's a lot of questions, but what I want to get across to you is that we have to pepper our childhood with many, many, many, many questions like this in order to begin to get a sense of what traditions we have inherited from our mothers and fathers.

[ 16 : 58 ] So all of these factors shape us in ways that we're largely unaware of. In addition, all of those questions will help you understand how you think about the world around you and people around you, but we also gain traditions that shape how we think about ourselves, that actually shape our very personalities.

We all have these kind of unconscious childhood messages that we have internalized that shape our personalities. Right? And I say unconscious because you could be sitting here, you know, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60 years old and have no idea that they're in there.

Right? So let me give you a couple examples of what this might look like. Maybe you're the oldest in your family, and maybe you had several younger siblings, and maybe your house was fairly chaotic, and so your parents always praised you for being the one sibling that they could count on to hold everything together to help with the younger siblings.

And your parents always said things to you like, I can always count on you. You're the one sane one in this family. I can always, you know, rely on you. And they gave you lots of responsibility, and you were operating like another parent from a very early age.

Right? Maybe that was your childhood. And even though your parents didn't mean it, maybe the way you internalized that is that you learned as a child, it's not okay for me to have needs.

[ 18 : 22 ] It's not okay for me to be a child. It's not okay for me to be overwhelmed. I'm the one my parents are counting on to be the anchor for all the other people who are freaking out and have needs.

And so maybe what you began to learn is, it's not okay for me to have needs, and the way I earn the love and approval of other people is by helping them. Right? It's not okay for me to have needs.

I need to help. And the more I help, the more helpful I am, the more love and approval and attention I will get. And then you take that into adulthood. You don't even realize you did. But what you realize is, that message gets carried with you, and then you start to become someone who doesn't even know what you need.

You've lost touch with your needs. You certainly don't know how to express your needs or wants or preferences to other people. When people say, what do you want for dinner? You're like, I truly don't know.

I truly don't know. You know, what do you want to do on the weekend? I have no idea what I want to do. I've never thought about it before, right? And then you're the kind of person who ends up going above and beyond to help the people in your life, and it's partly because you're helpful, but it's also partly because you think that's the only way they're going to love you.

[ 19 : 35 ] And if you're not helpful to them, they may abandon you, right? So this is just one example of how this thing can happen. Let me give you one more example for the sake of time.

Maybe you grew up with a parent who always made you feel like you were just falling short. Good job on the A minus. Should have been an A plus, right? And maybe anything less than straight A's was failure in your home.

And so what you learned as a child is it's really not okay to make mistakes. You internalize this sense that there's perfection, and then there's failure. And anything less than perfection is failure. And what you begin to realize is you feel like you're not quite ever meeting the standard that your parents set for your life. Unless I'm perfect, I'm worthless. And that's the message that you internalize.

See, this can happen in all kinds of ways. Let me just give you a few more examples of internal messages. Just see if any of these resonate with you. Some of us grow up feeling like it's not okay to have my own feelings, my own identity.

[ 20 : 38 ] That's not okay. Some of us grow up thinking it's not okay to be too functional or too happy. I mean, some people grow up and it's never okay to be happy.

If you're happy, you're naive. Somebody's gonna take advantage of you. Some people grow up saying it's not okay to be too comfortable in the world. Some people grow up internalizing the message it's not okay to trust yourself.

You really should get a second opinion. You can't trust your own judgment. Some people grow up internalizing the message it's not okay to depend on anyone for anything because if you depend on people, they're gonna let you down.

They're not gonna be there for you. Some people grow up with the message it's not okay to be vulnerable. It's not okay to be vulnerable. If you're vulnerable, people will hurt you. You gotta be strong.

Some people internalize the message it's not okay to assert yourself. If you assert yourself, you're gonna push people away. Nobody wants to hear. Right, so these are all examples and there are myriad other examples.

[ 21 : 38 ] So these are just a few. There are a couple of helpful tools for people who wanna go deeper and try to get a sense of what's in the past. What we've brought into the church. One, if you're in a core group, if you're new to our church and you're not in a core group, I'd strongly encourage you to join.

That's where we do a lot of the day-to-day discipleship and application of some of the things we talk about here. This week in our core groups, we're gonna be focusing on and are using a tool that helps you kind of map out unconscious childhood messages, cumulative messages that you've received and also kind of earthquake events in the life of your family growing up and ways that those have impacted you.

So that's one opportunity. But another opportunity is to sit down and to do what's called a genogram. A genogram is a tool that I used to use as a counselor and I still use it when I do premarital and marriage counseling sometimes.

But a genogram is a very helpful tool. I don't have time to explain all of the genogram to you right now. The good news is if you go online and you Google the word genogram, there are tons of online tools that make it a whole lot easier for you to do a genogram.

All you need is the information. But a genogram is essentially a way of mapping your family history with an emphasis on things that are gonna be relevant to the questions that we're asking this morning.

[ 22 : 57 ] Questions like history of mental illness, substance abuse or addiction, the spiritual condition of various people in your family, who was a believer, who was part of another religious tradition, who wasn't a believer, when people came to faith, when they lost their faith, if they left the faith, you can track, you know, as I said before, mental illness, mood disorders, patterns of abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, physical abuse.

You can track those things. The more information you have, the more you can put into your genogram, and then you can begin to see patterns here. So in this example of Julia's genogram, this is a fictitious family that I created, by the way.

This is not a real family in the church. But you see some clear patterns. There's a pattern of heart disease, right? There's a pattern of alcoholism and substance abuse. There's maybe even a pattern of emotional abuse.

There's certain trends that you see, and you realize, when the Bible talks about generational sin, there's really something to that. Generational sin that is passed from one generation to the next, to the next, to the next, to the next.

Do a genogram, you'll see it. You'll see it in your own family. I see it in my family, right? There are clear things that I've inherited that Laura and I need to be aware of as we're parenting our own children, right?

[ 24 : 21 ] So we need to go back. We need to understand the culture that we were born into, the family traditions that we inherited. But we don't stay there. We're Christians, and so ultimately, we know that our hope is in the new family, God's family, established in Jesus Christ.

And so moving forward means taking all of these unconscious childhood messages and then re-examining them in light of the gospel, right? So maybe you grew up being told it's not okay to make mistakes.

But then the gospel comes along, and the gospel tells you, listen, your worth is not based in your performance. It's okay to make mistakes because your security is not found there.

Your worth is secure because it's based in God's love and delight in who you are. It's not based in anything that you do. Or maybe you learned that it's not okay to be vulnerable with anyone because if you're vulnerable, that means you're weak, and people will hurt you and take advantage of you.

But then the gospel tells you, Jesus, the most powerful being in existence, was willing to make himself utterly vulnerable on the cross, and he did it for your sake.

[ 25 : 33 ] And so if there's anybody in the universe that you can trust with your own vulnerability, it's him. Right? So you begin to rework everything in light of the gospel.

Now I realize that some of you may be hearing this and thinking, you know, this sounds a lot like a psychology lecture, and this is a church, and we should really be talking about what it means to follow Jesus, especially on Palm Sunday, and here's the point I want to make to you.

That's exactly what we're talking about. That's exactly what we're talking about. The point that we often overlook as Christians is that you can consciously follow Jesus with one part of yourself, and at the very same time be unconsciously following someone or something else with another part of yourself.

And so most of us remain disconnected in our lives. We are conscious followers of Jesus, but unconsciously I am following the things that my family taught me about the way the world works when I was six years old.

And there is a disconnect. And what we need to do if we truly desire to follow Jesus with heart, soul, mind, and strength is to bring all of that together, to align all parts of ourself with the gospel.

[ 26 : 49 ] Speaking of being aligned with the gospel, there's a great example of this very point later in Galatians. Paul comes to Galatia and he confronts Peter over his racism.

You know, and today people are very happy to confront other people about racism and people get called out all the time online and in person, but you very rarely see somebody confront racism in the way that Paul does it.

Here's what Paul says in chapter 2, verse 14. He says, the reason that racism is wrong is because it is not in step with the gospel. So what he's telling Peter is this, Peter, you know better.

You were in Cornelius' home. You saw the Holy Spirit fall on the Gentiles. You know better, but what's happened? Peter has fallen back in the traditions of his fathers.

Peter has fallen back into the culture and the traditions he was born into. He has started to operate out of that childhood messaging that he received instead of the gospel.

[ 27 : 54 ] And so Paul has to come and say, this is not in line with the gospel. You need to go back, you need to rethink what you believe about the Gentiles in light of the truth of the gospel and then you'll understand that this racism is incompatible with Jesus Christ.

It's incompatible. It had a place in the old family. It does not belong in the family of God and Jesus Christ. Christ. Right? So we have to do this again and again and again because Jesus wants all of us.

And you know, following Jesus means asking this question about every aspect of our lives. Is this in step with the gospel or not? So like the labyrinth, you have to go back and then you go forward and then you go back and then you go forward and then you go back and that is progress in the Christian life.

We have to circle back again and again and again. And the last point I want to make is this. The good news is, friends, we don't have to do this alone. As I said before, every Christian has two families, the family you were born into and the family that you have been reborn into in Jesus Christ.

And that is meant to be true. In other words, you're not meant to do this alone, you're meant to do this in a community, right? That's why it's great that we can be together here in person, those of us who are here. We're meant to do this together.

[ 29 : 13 ] And I think the family of God at its best, I think a church like ours can be like a laboratory. It's like a laboratory where we can all take risks, fail if we need to, but ultimately relearn how to be human beings who are in step with the gospel, right?

We can celebrate the good things that we inherited from our mothers and our fathers. We can unlearn the ungodly, unbiblical, dysfunctional things that we learned from our mothers and our fathers.

Some of us, frankly, need to be reparented. We need to be reparented. Some of us need to learn what a healthy family looks like. Some people come into the church, they have never been part of a healthy family ever.

And that's why things in churches can get really, really, really messy. People come into church and people are fighting and talking behind each other's backs and slandering, and there's divisions, and they say, man, this is a really toxic church.

No, it's a lot of people who came out of really toxic environments who are simply doing what they know. And so the church needs to be a space where we can take risks and relearn how to be a family together.

[ 30 : 21 ] Right? Because listen, this church is not just made up of people in the pews, and it's not just made up of the people who are joining us online. Each person sitting here is an entire community of people.

Right? You're sitting there, but guess what? Even though you can't see them, your mom's there, your dad's there, your uncles are there, your siblings are there, their parents are there, your grandparents, great-grandparents, great-great-great-parents, all the way back, they're all sitting there with you.

This church is super crowded. It doesn't feel like it, but it's packed. Standing room only. All your friends and family are sitting here with you. Right? We bring family dysfunction into the church like you track mud into the house on a rainy day.

It just happens. And so the thing that we need to recognize is to be the kind of laboratory that we need to be as a church, we need enormous amounts of grace.

And the main thing that Paul learned at Sinai was this, chapter 3, verse 26, for in Christ Jesus you were all sons of God, you're all part of this new family through faith.

[ 31 : 27 ] So what God doesn't say is this, you need to deal with all your past, you need to deal with your dysfunction, go to a therapist, get better, and then you can be a part of my family. That's not what God says.

It's the opposite. He says, come as you are, track all the mud you want into my house, I'm the one who's going to wash you and make you clean. I'm the one who's going to give you a new identity. And knowing that we are loved and accepted as God's children, here and now, knowing that our identity is secure in Christ, knowing that we are members of this family, objectively, for all time, that's, I think, what gives us the courage we need to go back to deal with our past so that we might move forward together as God's family in the world.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word and we thank you for the gospel and we pray that as we celebrate your passion today and this week, Lord, as we celebrate your entry into Jerusalem and where that road would ultimately lead, Lord, I pray that you would give us gospel vision to see those parts of our past that need to be ended, the generational sin and brokenness that needs to be halted and I pray that you would give us a vision for what a new life looks like as sons and daughters of the King in the new worldwide family that you're building in the world and I pray that all this would happen in the power of your Holy Spirit in the name of your Son Jesus Christ and for your glory.  
Amen. Amen.